

OBITUARIES

Lucien E. Conein Dies at 79; Fabled Agent for OSS and CIA

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Lucien E. Conein, 79, a retired Army lieutenant colonel and covert intelligence agent whose career ranged from landing by aircraft in Nazi-occupied France during World War II to participation in the coup d'etat that brought down South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963, died June 3 at Suburban Hospital. He had heart ailments and had been hospitalized for several months after breaking a hip.

Col. Conein's career also included orchestrating the infiltration of spies and saboteurs into Eastern Europe after World War II, training paramilitary forces in Iran and a secret mission to organize anti-communist guerrillas in North Vietnam after the country was partitioned following the French defeat in Indochina in 1954.

He retired from the military and CIA in 1968 but later joined the Drug Enforcement Administration, where he directed an intelligence-gathering and operations unit until his civilian retirement in 1984.

Born in Paris, Col. Conein grew up in Kansas City, having been shipped there alone at age 5 by his widowed mother to live with her sister, a World War I French war bride of an American soldier. While growing up in Missouri, he retained his French citizenship, and when World War II began in 1939, he went to the French consulate in Chicago and joined the French Army.

After the fall of France to Ger-



Lt. Col. Lucien E. Conein gained fame for exploits in Vietnam.

many in 1940, he made his way back to the United States, joined the U.S. Army and, because of his fluency in French, was assigned to the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor agency of the CIA. In late 1944, he landed in Nazi-occu-

pied Southern France on a mission to deliver weapons to French Resistance forces who were preparing to attack German forces heading north to intercept the Allied advance across Europe.

After the war ended in Europe, he was transferred to the Pacific theater of operations, where he joined a military unit conducting raids against Japanese-held installations in North Vietnam. He was assigned to the Central Intelligence Agency when it was formed in 1947, keeping his military rank and position as a cover.

During the next two decades, Col. Conein would become the stuff of legend and romance in the intelligence community. Author David Halberstam, writing in "The Best and the Brightest," described him as "someone sprung to life from a pulp adventure." Stanley Karnow, in "Vietnam: A History," said he was an "eccentric, boisterous, often uncontrollable yet deeply sensitive and thoroughly professional agent." Henry Cabot Lodge, President John F. Kennedy's ambassador to South Vietnam, called him "the indispensable man" and a vital liaison between the U.S. Embassy and the South Vietnamese generals who plotted the overthrow and subsequent assassination of Diem in 1963.

An inveterate and enthusiastic storyteller, Col. Conein often prefaced his conversations with such statements as: "Now, this one is the double truth, scout's honor, the double truth," or "Don't believe anything I tell you; I'm an expert liar."

He sometimes talked about his

OSS service in wartime France, where he lived and worked with the Corsican Brotherhood, which also was part of the Resistance. Before he left France, he was made a member, Col. Conein said. He added: "When the Sicilians put out a contract, it's usually limited to the continental United States, or maybe Canada or Mexico, but with the Corsicans it's international. They'll go anywhere. There's an old Corsican proverb: 'If you want revenge and you act within 20 years, you're acting in haste.'"

Part of the mystique about him was the widely held belief that he had once served in the French Foreign Legion. He was a regular at annual French Foreign Legion dinners in Washington. But in fact he had never officially been part of the organization. He had two fingers missing on his right hand, the result, it was generally thought, of a daring and hazardous clandestine operation. In fact, his fingers were cut off by the fan of a stalled automobile he was trying to repair.

Former CIA colleague E. Howard Hunt considered hiring Col. Conein for the group that bungled the 1972 Watergate burglary of the Democratic National Committee, which ultimately led to the scandal that resulted in President Richard M. Nixon's resignation. "If I'd been involved, we'd have done it right," Col. Conein once told Karnow.

In Vietnam in the late 1950s, Col. Conein served in a special action group under Gen. Edward Lansdale in a CIA-directed operation aimed at undermining the communist leadership in Hanoi and the northern part of the country. A common tactic was to organize and stage funerals without a corpse and to bury a coffin filled with weapons for later use by anti-communists. Because of his French background and wartime service against the Japanese in Vietnam, Col. Conein had the trust and confidence of many of the Vietnamese military officers, but the campaign against the communist leadership in Hanoi never

flourished.

Later, when senior military officers in South Vietnam were plotting against Diem, they sought out Col. Conein as their conduit to the U.S. Embassy. "These men trusted Conein as they would not have trusted another CIA agent," wrote Neil Sheehan in his book about Vietnam, "A Bright Shining Lie."

"He was an old comrade, and his French birth fortified the relationship. When he was with them, he saw that his French side came out,

because he lived in both cultures in spirit and he knew that it put them at ease."

After leaving the CIA in 1968, Col. Conein returned to South Vietnam as a private businessman, then in 1972 joined the DEA.

He was in media headlines in the mid-1970s when then-Sen. Lowell Weicker (R-Conn.) investigated allegations that a DEA unit was preparing to arrange the assassination of drug lords. These charges were denied and nothing was ever proven.

Col. Conein's decorations included a Distinguished Service Cross, a Silver Star with Oak Leaf Cluster, a Bronze Star and the CIA's Intelligence Star.

Survivors include his wife of 41 years, Elyette B. Conein of McLean; six sons; a daughter; 11 grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.